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ABSTRACT

A study of the extent to which the sequence-of-tenses rule (STR) is used in television news reporting in the United States is presented. The study examines which tenses are shifted most frequently and explains the uses and functions of tense variation. It is argued that STR is not always a semantically and pragmatically unmarked form as proposed by prescriptive grammars. Rather, in almost all cases in which it may be optional, reporters shift tenses to distance themselves from quoted speakers or quoted speech contents. By the same token, tenses are not shifted when reporters agree with the original speaker. However, if negative evaluation is marked by other devices, lack of tense shift is used to signal that the original speaker is still committed to the validity of his proposition, suggesting that the news content is still valid. A special case is simple past in the original speech, which is hardly ever backshifted, and in which case other devices mark evaluation. This suggests that the tense backshift rule is being replaced by the tense concord rule and that retention of simple past is typical of colloquial style, which networks try to use in their broadcasting. (Author/MSE)

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Tense Variation in Indirect Speech*

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Abstract

Prescriptive accounts of indirect speech in English postulate the so-called sequence-of-tenses rule (STR) (Blackstone 1962; Quirk et al. 1972, 1985). Accordingly, if a verb of saying is in the past tense, the verb in the reported speech part shifts to the corresponding past tense form (e.g. present tense to past tense, present perfective to past perfective). If the second verb is already in simple past, two versions of STR exist (Comrie 1985): (1) shift to past perfective (tense backshift), (2) no shift (tense concord). While grammars disagree whether STR is *obligatory*, it is considered *optional* if the original speech content is still valid at the time of reporting *(She said that the world is round)*. This paper discusses to what extent STR is applied in U.S. television news. It examines which tenses are shifted most frequently and explains the uses and functions of tense variation. I argue that STR is not always the semantically and pragmatically unmarked form as proposed by prescriptive grammars. Rather, in almost all cases in which it may be *optional*, reporters shift tenses to distance themselves from quoted speakers or quoted speech contents. By the same token, tenses are not shifted when reporters agree with the original speaker. However, if negative evaluation is marked by other linguistic devices, lack of tense shift is used to signal that the original speaker is still committed to the validity of his/her proposition. This, in turn, suggests that the news content is still valid and, therefore, relevant information. A special case is simple past in the original speech; it is hardly ever backshifted and other devices mark evaluation. This suggests that the tense backshift rule is being replaced by the tense concord rule and that retention of simple past is typical of colloquial style (Comrie 1985), a style which networks try to use in their news broadcasts.

1. Introduction

The topic of this paper, tense variation in indirect speech, is part of a study on how television news reporters report what someone else has said previously, for example, a politician or an eyewitness. One form of reported speech is what has been called "indirect speech". Quite simplified, this means that we have a verb of saying and a reported clause with the appropriate shifts in local, personal, and temporal deixis, which now take into account the reporting speaker's point of view. So, for example, direct speech: *She said: 'I will leave tomorrow'*, may become in indirect speech: *She said that she would leave today*. As can be seen this may also involve tense shifts in the reported clause. It is this phenomenon which I will discuss in what follows.

2. Tense Shifts

Prescriptive accounts of indirect speech in English postulate what has been called a sequence-of-tenses rule (cf. Blackstone 1962:16-19; Comrie 1985:107-117; Huddleston 1984:151f; Quirk et al. 1972:786-788, 1985:1026-1028). According to this rule, if the verb of saying is in the past tense, then the verb in the reported clause is shifted to the corresponding past tense form, too. So, future tense becomes future in the past, present tense becomes past tense, etc. (see Table 1).

Direct Speech	Indirect Speech
Future	Form of Past Modal Auxiliary
Present	Simple Past
Simple Past	Past Perfective (Tense Backshift) Simple Past (Simple Tense Concord)
Present Perfective	Past Perfective
Past Perfective	
Present Modal Auxiliary	Form of Past Modal Auxiliary
Past Modal Auxiliary	

Table 1. Tense shifts from direct to indirect speech according to sequence-of-tenses rule.

If the verb is already in the simple past tense, two possibilities exist: either a shift to the past perfective, that is, *Tense Backshift*, or no shift, that is, *Simple Tense Concord*. As Comrie (1985:117) states, this last option suggests two slightly different versions of the sequence-of-

tenses rule:

(1) Shift the tense back to a higher degree of anteriority, if the grammatical form exists; that is, shift to the past perfective.

(2) Create tense concord between the verb of saying and the reprorted verb; that is, the verb remains in the simple past tense.

Although grammarians differ on whether or not the sequence of tenses is obligatory, by and large they agree that it is the semantically and pragmatically unmarked form. So, lack of tense concord would be considered the exception to the rule. On the other hand, tense concord is considered *optional* if the original speech content is still valid at the time of reporting, for example, *He said that the world is round.*

3. Tense Shifts in Television News

In this paper, I examine to what extent the sequence-of-tenses rule is applied in U.S. television news and how it can be explained. The data of my study are ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news-casts, which were video-taped during the week of the Gorbachev-Reagan summit in Geneva in November 1985.

Here I address three questions:

(1) How frequent is tense concord?

(2) Which tenses are most frequently backshifted?

(3) How is tense shift, or lack of tense shift, used as evaluation?

Question (1) is easy to answer based on surface tense markers. For question (2), which is the prerequisite to answering question (3), one has to know what the original tense form is. In most cases the original speech was not available and I had to infer it. However, most of the time it was relatively easy to determine whether tenses had been backshifted or not; I will comment on my decisions when we get to the examples.

Table 2 shows how frequent tense concord is and whether it has been achieved through

tense backshift or because the original speech was already in a past tense form.

	ABC N=77	CBS N=52	NBC N=78	TOTAL N=207
Tense Concord	79.2%	76.9%	60.2%	71.5%
Tense Backshift	59.0%	45.0%	40.4%	49.3%
Past in Original	39.3%	50.0%	55.3%	47.3%
Unclear Cases	1.7%	5.0%	4.3%	3.4%

Table 2. Tense concord in indirect speech in U.S. evening news and percentages of tense concord through either tense backshift or past tense in original speech.

Just looking at the total, one sees that *Tense Concord* occurs in about 70% of all instances. About half of all such cases are the result of tense backshift, the other half because there was a past tense form in the original speech. This finding suggests that tense *backshift* in indirect speech --- at least on U.S. television news --- is not categorically applied.

More important, however, is the question which tenses are shifted if a corresponding past tense form exists and which are not. Table 3 summarizes these shifts.

Original	Indirect Speech	ABC	CBS	NBC	TOTAL
Future N=32	Future in Past	75.0%	66.7%	57.1%	65.6%
Present N=67	Simple Past	60.0%	52.6%	40.0%	50.7%
Simple Past N=28	Past Perfective	41.4%	18.2%	4.5%	23.3%

Table 3. Some tense shifts in indirect speech on U.S. TV news. Tense shifts are arranged in descending order of application.

4. Discussion of Examples

Future in the Original

Although the percentages differ considerably among the three networks, the most likely tense shift is from future tense to the past modal form *would*. As prescriptive grammars predict, in all instances without tense shift, the original proposition is still valid at the time of reporting (11/32), for example:

(1) [ABC, 20 November]

In a phone-call with relatives in the U.S.,

Bonner confirmed,

that she WILL FLY to Boston (...) in December.

Here, *in December* explicitly indicates future from the time of reporting, which was November.

In cases in which the original proposition does not apply any longer, that is, it is in the past as seen from the point of view of the reporter, tense is shifted consistently (14/32):

(2) [NBC, 22 November]

And when General Franco's fascists won,

he said,

he WOULD BE totalitarian.

It is a fair assumption that Franco stated his intentions in the indicative form. At the time of the news report (1985), he and his dictatorship have been dead for ten years; the proposition is therefore not valid anymore.

There are, however, instances in which the proposition is still valid at the time of reporting. In that case, shifting or not shifting tenses is considered optional, and I suggest that here tense is used as a means of evaluation. I will discuss such examples by comparing when present tense is shifted to simple past tense (34/67) and when it is not (31/67) and also draw on examples from future tense and present perfective in the original speech act.

Present Tense in the Original

The most generally applicable explanation is as follows: tenses are backshifted when the reporter does not want to commit himself to the validity of the reported speech content, and when he

seems to disagree with the original speaker:

(3) [CBS, 20 November]

And then,

counterattacking,

(Gorbachev) said,

the United States HAD its own human rights problems,

including unemployment and anti-Semitism.

Here, Gorbachev is not talking about past U.S. human rights problems; rather, he is still convinced of the validity of his assertion. Note also how the speech-act indicating verb *counterattacking* suggests that Gorbachev's utterance is used strategically and is therefore not true. In contrast, lack of tense shift seems to signal agreement with the speaker:

(4) [NBC, 22 November]

He (Reagan) said,

there HAVE BEEN twenty-three violations altogether.

(refers to Russian violations of adherence to treaties)

Based on such examples, I conclude that tense shift is not always the pragmatically unmarked form as prescriptive grammars suggest. Rather, it distances the reporter from the original speaker and speech content and is therefore used evaluatively.

Other findings support this conclusion: When the speech of Gorbachev and of Soviet officials is quoted, tenses are backshifted in 85% of all cases (23/27). This is the case even when the reported speech content is not controversial; we may thus say that reporters use it as a distancing device from the original speaker rather than from the speech content, for example:

(5) [ABC, 19 November]

The Soviet journalist asked Mrs. Gorbachev (>>>).

whether she SPOKE much English.

(Mrs. Gorbachev answers: Yes, a little)

Here, the reported proposition is still valid at the time of reporting; either shifting or not shifting of tenses would therefore have been grammatical.

In contrast, if the speech of Reagan or of other Americans is reported, tense are backshifted in only 26% of the cases (5/19). In those 5 cases, reporters use tense shift to indicate their distancing from the speech content, for example:

(6) [NBC, 20 November]

Regan said,

they (women) WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND missile throw weights (...),

(...)

Well, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder (...) was outraged.

She said,

that'S a real insult,

and that women DESERVE an apology.

Actually, Donald Regan's original speech is superimposed simultaneously on the screen and reads as follows: *"They are not going to understand ..."* Thus, tense shift to *would* is evaluative, especially when contrasted with the subsequent lines, in which a critic of Regan's comments is quoted and tenses are not shifted: *that's a real insult and that women deserve better.*

Along the same lines, tenses are shifted in the indirect speech of terrorists, criminals, and the South African government, but not in the indirect speech of Russian dissidents, South African church leaders, and law enforcement agencies.

However, there are a few examples in which tenses are not backshifted, although we can assume that the reporter disagrees with the content of the reported speech, for example:

(7) [CBS, 20 November]

Some of those accused claimed,

they'RE victims of army brass,

who DISLIKE covert operations.

(...)

But others,

familiar with this investigation,

dismissed that as nonsense.

How can this be reconciled with the claim that present tense is shifted to past tense, if the reporter disagrees with the original speaker and his speech? I suggest two explanations: first, the surrounding information clearly distances the reporter from the speakers, here, the accused army members, and what they say; for example, the verb of saying *claimed* in line (1), which is negatively evaluative, but also the rebuttal by the investigators, *dismissed that as nonsense*. Second, once distancing from the reported proposition has been established, present tense may be retained to fulfill another function.

To explain such examples, I suggest that lack of tense concord may signal two different types of the validity of a reported propsition: first, it may signal the reporter's agreement with the speech content; second, as is the case in example (7), provided that disagreement is indicated by other means, it signals that what is reported in the news item is valid in the sense that the original speaker is still committed to it. News is thereby actualized by extending a proposition into the present and even the future, which shows that the reporting is up-to-date. This, in turn, increases the overall importance and significance of the news reporting.

Finally, I want to remark briefly on tense shift to the past perfective.

Past Tenses in the Original

Based on my data, I conclude that there is a tendency not to shift past tenses further back (80% of instances). Thus, the general rule is to keep the simple past tense and signal disagreement, if necessary, by other indicators. Only ABC uses tense backshift to the past perfective to some extent (37.5% of the time). NBC, in contrast, uses it in only 3.3% of all possible cases. Consider the following examples from NBC (no backshift) and ABC (backshift):

(8) [NBC, 22 November]

He (Reagan) told his cabinet today,

a great deal WAS ACCOMPLISHED at the Geneva summit.

(continues withindirect speech of others who disagree)

(9) [ABC, 22 November]

The president received a standing ovation from his cabinet today,

(...)

and continued his general upbeat assessment,

that much HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED.

The quotes are almost identical: *a great deal was accomplished* (NBC) versus *much had been accomplished* (ABC). If one takes into account that the retention of the simple past tense indicates a less formal style than a backshift to the past perfective, as suggested by Comrie (1985), we may conclude that U.S. networkd prefer the less formal option. At the same time, ABC uses the more formal option most frequently of the three networks. It would be interesting to analyze other features of formal versus informal style to answer whether or not the networks differ with respect to style.

5. Summary and Conclusions

To summarize briefly, tenses in indirect speech on U.S. television news are categorically backshifted if a reported proposition is no longer valid at the time of reporting. However, more interesting with respect to the question of how reporters evaluate the speech of others is tense choice when the shift is *optional*. I found overwhelming evidence that tense shift is used as a marker of negative evaluation, that is, to signal that the reporter distances himself from the original speaker and/or speech content. By the same token, tense is not backshifted when reporters agree with the reported proposition or when they have a positive stance toward the original speaker. This is the simple, straightforward explanation which accounts for most cases.

However, if other linguistic devices are used to establish unambiguously that reporters distance themselves from the reported proposition, then tense shift does not have to be used. In these cases, which are relatively infrequent, present tense is used to indicate that the original speaker is still committed to the validity of the proposition, which thereby suggests the up-to-dateness of the

news reporting.

A special case of tense use is past tense in the original. While shifts from simple past to past perfective may be used evaluatively, in most instances, simple past tense remains unshifted; evaluation is then signaled by other linguistic devices. This finding suggests that the *Tense Back-shift* rule is undergoing a change with respect to simple past tense and is being replaced by the *Simple Tense Concord* rule, that is, an indirect speech report is considered grammatical if the verbs in the main and the subordinate clauses are in the same tense.

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